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SUBJECT: GOR SILENCE ON KIM JONG IL'S HEALTH SIGN OF
DECLINING INFLUENCE AND INTEREST IN NORTH KOREA

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Alice Wells, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Moscow has had little to say about the reported illness of North Korean leader Kim Jong IL. Russian experts believe this is due to the fact that Russia no longer has real influence over or interest in the DPRK beyond the six-party talks. North Korea watchers here are divided on how to deal with the DPRK regime, urging contingency planning for a post-Kim transition and caution over Pyongyang's efforts to sell - again and again - its disarmament cooperation. End Summary.

12. (C) In the two weeks since reports surfaced that North Korean leader Kim Jong IL may be gravely ill, the Russian government has maintained an almost deafening silence. Foreign Minister Lavrov, when asked to comment on the news during a September 10 joint press conference with visiting South Korean Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan, simply said that he did not have any information. In private, Russian Foreign Ministry officials have maintained the same line. The South Korean Embassy told us that Lavrov's comment to the press was a repeat of what he said to FM Yu during their lunch earlier, while MFA's First Asia Department has declined to provide an assessment of how Kim's possible incapacitation or death would affect the Korean Peninsula. Our Japanese Embassy colleagues have also had no luck in gleaning Russian thinking on this issue, and indicated to us that Tokyo was troubled by the Russian silence.

Russia No Longer Has Influence, but Maybe China Does

13. (C) Russian academics see this silence as confirmation that, despite GOR interests in nuclear non-proliferation on the Korean Peninsula and participation in the Six Party talks, Russia no longer maintains influence over North Korea the way the Soviet Union did. Executive Director of the Center for Policy Studies in Russia (PIR Center) Anton Khlopkov asserted that Russia lost its influence on North Korea in the early 1990s. Although there was a brief attempt to recover lost ground in the late 1990s that culminated in Putin's 2000 visit to Pyongyang, the DPRK's subsequent backtracking on a promise to Putin to abandon its nuclear program in exchange for economic carrots "made a fool" out of the Russian government. Since then, Khlopkov argued, the GOR has not made further meaningful attempts to regain influence over North Korea. In his view, Moscow is not interested in spending more money to buy over a regime just because it is anti-U.S., especially given North Korea's existing \$8 billion Soviet-era debt to Russia. Vasiliy Mikheev, Director of the China and Japan Studies Center at the Institute for World Economy and International Relations, stated to us flatly that Russia had done no planning for a post-Kim North Korea, and was not likely to give this issue careful consideration given more pressing issues elsewhere.

14. (C) Mikheev asserted that according to his sources in the Chinese academic and diplomatic communities, Beijing has a contingency plan for Kim's death and may want to preview it with the U.S. before discussing with South Korea and other Six Party partners. (NB. The Chinese Embassy here has not made such indications to us.) He indicated that it was imperative for the U.S., Russia, and China to coordinate approaches. In his view, the Georgia crisis had again demonstrated that small countries can become the source of conflict between bigger world powers. North Korea post-Kim Jong Il has the potential to become another such flashpoint without prior consultation between the stakeholders. Both Mikheev and Khlopkov said that should Kim die, an intense power struggle will occur, and North Korea is likely to cut off all communications to the outside until a new leader emerges. Khlopkov sees the military as the eventual victor, which will then take a hard line on the negotiations.

How Do You Solve a Problem Like North Korea?

15. (C) Amidst the anxiety about DPRK's future, North Korea watchers in Moscow are divided on how to advance the Six Party Talks. Khlopkov said that buying North Korean nuclear capabilities was the only viable way to achieve gradual disarmament. Mikheev, on the other hand, asserted that the parties were wasting their time at the negotiating table without concurrent efforts to encourage more systemic reforms in North Korea. Pyongyang's nuclear program was the only "good" it has worth trading with the outside world. It therefore would never completely give up its nuclear ambitions and would want to sell this "good" over and over to get maximum economic benefit. Chinese Embassy Political Counselor Gui Congyou likens North Korea to a misbehaving child who requires chocolates and patience to induce positive behavior. In this regard, he asserted that U.S. demands on the verification protocol may be too bitter for the North Koreans to swallow.

BEYRLE